**The colonial heritage - in Africa**

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By 1935, colonialism had been fastened on Africa like a steel grid, and it looked as if it was going to remain there forever. However, colonialism proved just as ephemeral as any other institution created and maintained by force. Within a matter of only some forty-five years from 1935, the colonial system had been uprooted from over ninety per cent of Africa and confined to that part of the continent south of the Limpopo River.

What legacy did colonialism bequeath to Africa? Did it constitute an important revolutionary episode in the history of the continent? Was it a major break with the past, or was it, after all, merely a passing event?

To some historians its impact was on balance either a blessing in disguise or, at worst, not harmful for Africa:

"It is easy to cavil today" wrote PC. Lloyd, "at the slow rate of economic development during the half-century of colonial rule... Nevertheless, the difference between the condition of African society at the end of the nineteenth century and at the end of the Second World War is staggering. The colonial powers provided the infrastructure on which progress in the 'independence' period has depended: a fairly efficient administrative machine, reaching down to villages in the most remote areas, a network of roads and railways, and basic services in health and education."

Others have contended that the beneficial effect of colonialism in Africa was virtually nil. The Black Guyanese historian, Walter Rodney, has taken a particularly extreme position:

"The argument suggests that, on the one hand, there was exploitation and oppression, but, on the other hand, that colonial governments did much for the benefit of Africans and that they developed Africa. It is our contention that this is completely false. Colonialism had only one hand--it was a one-armed bandit."

From the available evidence, however, it would appear that a much more balanced assessment is necessary. The impact of colonialism was positive as well as negative. However, it should be emphasized that most of the positive effects were, by and large, rather accidental by-products of activities or measures intended to promote the interests of the colonizers.

The first positive political impact was the establishment of a greater degree of continuous peace and stability in Africa than before. The nineteenth century was the century of the Mfecane and the activities of the Swahili-Arab and Nyamweze traders such as Tipu Tip and Msiri in central and southern Africa, of the Fulani djihads and the rise of the Tukulor and Mandingo empires in western Sudan, and of the disintegration of the Oyo and Asante empires in west Africa; and all this caused a great deal of instability and insecurity.

The first two or three decades of the colonial era, that is from 1880 to 1910, intensified this state of instability, violence and disorder and caused wholesale and unpardonable destruction and loss of population. But after the colonial occupation and the establishment of various administrative machineries, most parts of Africa, especially from the end of the First World War onwards, enjoyed a great degree of continuous peace and security.

The second positive impact is reflected in the very geo-political appearance of the modern independent States of Africa. In place of the hundreds of independent clan and lineage groups, city-States, Kingdoms and empires, without any clearly defined boundaries, were now established fifty new States with, in most cases, fixed boundaries; and it is rather significant that the boundaries of the States as laid down during the colonial era have not undergone any changes since independence.

Thirdly, the colonial system also introduced into most parts of Africa two new institutions which have been maintained since independence, namely a new judicial system and a new bureaucracy or civil service.

The final positive impact of colonialism was not only the birth of a new type of African nationalism, but also of pan-Africanism. Important as this legacy was, however, it is a typical example of the accidental by-products rather than the deliberate creations of the colonial presence. No colonial ruler ever set out to create and nurture African nationalism.

But if there were positive effects, the negative effects were even greater. In the first place, important as the development of nationalism was, it was generated by a sense of anger, frustration and humiliation caused by some of the oppressive, discriminatory and exploitative measures introduced by the colonial rulers. With the overthrow of colonialism that feeling was bound to lose some of its momentum and the problem that has faced the rulers of independent African States has been how to replace it with a positive and enduring feeling of nationalism.

Secondly, while admitting that the geo-political set-up that emerged was an asset, even though an accidental one, it nevertheless created far more problems than it solved. Though the boundaries of the States that emerged were not as arbitrary as is generally believed, there is no doubt that many of the States that emerged were artificial creations made up of a medley of peoples with different cultures, traditions, origins and languages. The problems of nation-building posed by such a medley of peoples have not proved to be easily soluble.

Another outcome was that the States that emerged were of widely differing sizes with unequal natural resources and economic potentialities.

Another important but negative political impact of colonialism was the weakening of the indigenous systems of government. The colonial officials on the spot became, in effect, dictators instead of advisers to the traditional rulers whom they used to enforce some of the measures deemed obnoxious by their subjects, such as forced labor, direct taxes and compulsory recruitment of men for the colonial armies. Moreover, the spread of the Christian religion further undermined the spiritual basis of the authority of the kings.

A product of colonialism which is often ignored by historians but whish has turned out to be of crucial importance was the creation of full-time, standing armies. These armies were originally created, most of them in the 1880s and 1890s, first for the conquest and occupation of Africa, then for the maintenance of colonial control, and, finally, for the prosecution of global wars and the suppression of independence movements in Africa. After the overthrow of the colonial rulers, these armies were not disbanded but were taken over by the new independent African rulers and they have turned out to be the most problematic of the products of colonialism.

The final and probably the most important negative political impact of colonialism was the loss of African sovereignty and independence and the right to deal directly with the outside world.

This meant, above all, the loss of their right to control their own destiny, to plan their own development, manage their economy, determine their own strategies and priorities, borrow freely from the world at large the latest and most appropriate technology, and generally manage, or even mismanage, their own affairs and derive inspiration and a sense of fulfillment from their successes and lessons and experience from their failures. In short, colonialism deprived Africans of one of the most fundamental and inalienable rights of a people--the right of liberty.

Moreover, the seventy-year period of colonialism in Africa was the very period which witnessed tremendous and decisive developments and changes in both the capitalist and socialist countries. It was the period, for instance, that saw the entry of Europe into the age of the airplane and the motor vehicle and the nuclear age. Had Africa been in control of her own destiny, she could have benefited from or even been part of these phenomenal changes. But colonialism completely insulated and isolated her from these changes and kept her in a position of dependency.

The impact in the economic field was equally important and equally mixed. The first and most obvious of the positive impacts was the provision of a basic infrastructure of roads, railways, telegraph, telephone and, in some cases, even airports. Completed by the 1930s, this infrastructure facilitated the movement not only of goods, the new cash crops, and troops, but also of peoples, and this latter factor helped to minimize parochialism, regionalism and ethnocentrism.

Equally important and significant was the impact of colonialism on the primary sector of the economy. It was during the colonial period that the full mineral potential of Africa was realized; the mining industry boomed while the cultivation of cash crops such as cocoa, coffee, tobacco, groundnuts, sisal and rubber spread. In West Africa these cash crops were produced by the Africans themselves, clear evidence of their willingness and ability to adapt and respond to the right incentives.

This economic revolution had some far-reaching consequences. Before the colonial era huge tracts of land in many parts of Africa were not only under-populated but also under-utilized. The introduction and spread of cash crops and the mining industries put an end to all this. Secondly, the economic revolution led to an increase in the purchasing power of some Africans and with it an increase in their demand for consumer goods. Thirdly, the growing of cash crops by Africans enabled individuals of whatever social status, especially in the rural areas, to acquire wealth.

Another significant revolutionary impact was the introduction of the money economy. This led to the emergence of a new class of wage earners and salaried groups. The introduction of the money economy also led to the commencement of banking activities in Africa, which became another significant feature of the economy of independent African States.

By 1935, the economy of Africa had become inextricably tied to that of the world in general and of the capitalist economy of the colonial powers in particular. The years after 1935 merely deepened this link and not even independence has fundamentally altered this relationship.

Was the colonial impact on Africa in the economic field then a desirable one? Far from it.

In the first place, the infrastructure that was provided by colonialism was not as adequate or as useful as it could have been. Most of the roads and railways were constructed not to open up the country but merely to connect the areas having mineral deposits and the potential for the production of cash crops with the sea, and there were hardly any feeder or branch roads. Nor were they meant to facilitate inter-African travel and communication

In the second place, such economic growth as occurred in the colonies was based on the natural resources of the area and this meant, therefore, that areas not naturally endowed were totally neglected.

Thirdly, a typical feature of the colonial economy was the total and deliberate neglect or discouragement of industrialization and the processing of locally-produced raw materials and agricultural products in most of the colonies. Simple and basic items such as matches, candles, edible oil, even lime and orange juice, all of which could easily have been produced in Africa, were imported. All African States were therefore turned into markets for the consumption of manufactured goods from the metropolitan countries and producers of raw materials for export. This total neglect of industrialization by the colonial powers should be chalked up as one of them most unpardonable indictments of colonialism.

Fourth, not only was industrialization neglected but such industries and crafts as had existed in Africa in pre-colonial times were almost destroyed as a result of the importation into Africa of cheap, mass-produced commodities. African technological development was thereby halted and was not resumed until after independence.

Fifthly, even though agricultural crops came to constitute the main source of income for most African States, no attempts were made to diversify the agricultural economies of the colonies. On the contrary, by 1935, the production of only single or, at best, two cash crops had become the rule--cocoa in the Gold Coast, groundnuts in Senegal and Gambia, cotton in Sudan, coffee and cotton in Uganda and coffee and sisal in Tanganyika. Most African States, on the attainment of independence, found themselves saddled with monoculture economies and were therefore highly sensitive to the prevailing international trade winds. Colonialism did indeed complete the integration of African economies into the world international economic order, but in a very disadvantageous and exploitative manner.

Because of the concentration on the production of cash crops during the colonial era, Africans were compelled to ignore the production of food for their own consumption. It was this neglect of food production, coupled with forced labor, which caused so much malnutrition, severe famine and so many epidemics in some parts of Africa during the early colonial days. Thus, under the colonial system, Africans were in most cases made to produce what they did not produce, clear evidence of the lopsided and exploitative nature of the colonial economy.

The colonial presence also led to the appearance on the African scene of an increasing number of expatriate banking, shipping and trading firms, and from the 1910s onwards their amalgamation and consolidation into fewer and fewer oligopolies. Since it was these trading companies that controlled the export as well as the import trade and fixed the prices not only of imported commodities but also of the exports produced by Africans, the huge profits that accrued from these activities went to the companies and not to the Africans.

Colonialism also virtually put a stop to inter-African trade as the flow of trade from each colony was reoriented towards the metropolitan countries.

Finally, whatever economic growth there was during the colonial period was achieved at a phenomenal and unjustifiable cost to the African--forced labor, migrant labor, compulsory cultivation of certain crops, compulsory seizure of land, forced movements of populations with the consequent dislocation of family life, the pass system, high mortality rates in the mines and on the plantations and brutal repression of the protest and resistance movements these measures generated.

What is the record of colonialism in the social field? The first important beneficial social effect was the overall increase of the population of Africa during the colonial period of nearly forty per cent after an initial decline during the first two or three decades. This increase was due to the establishment of an economic base, the spread of roads and railways which ensured that food could be rushed to famine areas, and the campaigns launched against epidemic diseases such as sleeping sickness, bubonic plague and yellow fever.

Closely connected with this was the second social impact of colonialism--urbanization. The kingdoms and empires of Africa had such capitals or political centers as Kumbi Saleh, Benin, Ile-Ife, Kumasi, Gao and Zimbabwe, commercial centers such as Kano, Jenne, Sofala and Malindi, and such educational centers as Timbuktu, Cairo and Fez. But there is no doubt that, as a result of colonialism, the pace of urbanization was greatly accelerated and completely new towns came into existence.

Moreover, the population of both the already existing towns and the new towns grew by leaps and bounds during the colonial era. The population of Nairobi, founded in 1896 as a transit depot for the construction of the Uganda railway, increased from a mere handful to 13,145 in 1927 and to over 25,000 in 1940, and that of Lagos from 74,000 in 1914 to 230,000 in 1950, that of Dakar from 19,800 in 1916 to 92,000 in 1936 and to 132,000 in 1945.

There was also undoubtedly an improvement in the quality of life, particularly for those living in the urban centers. This was the result of the provision of hospitals, dispensaries, pipe-borne water, sanitary facilities, better housing and the abolition of such practices as domestic slavery by the colonial rulers as well as the increase in employment opportunities.

The spread of Christianity, Islam and Western education was another important impact of colonialism. It was during the colonial period that Christianity gained a firm foothold in eastern and central Africa, at times following and at times being followed by the flag and trade. Islam also spread rapidly in western and eastern Africa as a result of the general improvement in communications during the colonial period and the patronage of both the French and the British rulers. It should be emphasized that these gains were not made at the expense of traditional religion. What colonialism did, then, was to strengthen and perpetuate religious pluralism in Africa, thereby enriching its religious life.

Closely associated with the spread of Christianity was that of Western education. Certainly, by the end of the colonial regime, there were relatively few areas without at least elementary schools. The spread of Western education had far-reaching social effects, among which was an increase in the number of the westernized educated African elite, an elite which now constitutes the ruling oligarchy and the backbone of the civil service of African States.

Another important colonial impact, a mixed blessing as we shall see, was the provision of a lingua franca for each colony or set of colonies. In all the colonies, the mother tongue of the colonial power, either in its pure or pidgin form, became the official and business language and, in many cases, the main means of communication between the numerous linguistic groups that constituted the population of each colony. It is significant that, except in North Africa, The United Republic of Tanzania, Kenya and Madagascar, these languages have remained the official languages to this very day.

The final beneficial social impact was the new social structure that colonialism introduced into some parts of Africa or whose development it accelerated in others. Although the traditional social structure allowed for social mobility, its class structure appeared to give undue weight to birth. The new colonial order, on the other hand, emphasized individual merit and achievement. All these changes radically altered the traditional social structure.

Thus, by the 1930s, in place of the pre-colonial social classes of the traditional ruling aristocracy, the ordinary people, domestic slaves and a relatively small educated elite, a new society emerged that had become more sharply divided than before into urban and rural dwellers, each of which was differently stratified. Mobility within this new structure was based more on individual effort and attainment than on ascription.

On the negative side, however, the phenomenal growth of the population of the urban centers was not the result of the natural increase of the urban population but rather of the continuous pull of young men and women to the urban centers by the need for education and employment and the push from the rural areas by famine, epidemics, poverty and taxation. Moreover, since the Europeans tended to live in the urban centers, all those facilities that improved the quality of life were established only in those areas. The rural areas were therefore virtually neglected and this in turn accentuated the drift from one to the other. A huge gap exists even today between urban and rural areas in Africa and there is no doubt that it was the colonial system that originated and widened this gap.

Nor did the migrants find the urban centers the safe and rich haven they had expected. In no town were the Africans accepted as equals and fully integrated. Moreover, nowhere did a majority of them find jobs or decent accommodation. Most of them found themselves crowded into the suburbs and the shanty towns in which unemployment, juvenile delinquency, drunkenness, prostitution, crime and corruption became their lot. Colonialism did not only impoverish rural life, it also bastardized urban life.

A second serious social legacy has been the European and Asian settler problem. What made their presence so inimical to Africans was that the Europeans came to occupy most of the fertile lands while the Asians monopolized the retail and wholesale trades. By 1935, this Asian and European problem had assumed very serious proportions for Africa and it has not been entirely resolved to this day.

Furthermore, though colonialism did introduce some social services as we have seen, it must be emphasized that not only were these services grossly inadequate and unevenly distributed in each colony, they were all, by and large, meant primarily for the benefit of the few white settlers and administrators, hence their concentration in the towns. In Nigeria in the 1930s, whereas there were 12 modern hospitals for 4,000 Europeans in the country, there were only 52 for Africans numbering over 40 million.

In the field of education, what was provided during the colonial days was grossly inadequate, unevenly distributed and badly orientated and therefore not as beneficial as it could have been for Africa. Five different types of educational institutions were established under colonial rule: primary, secondary, teacher-training, technical and university. But while many primary schools had been established by 1860 in British West Africa, it was not until 1876 that the first secondary schools were established in the Gold Coast and Nigeria. It was not until after the Second World War that technical schools and university colleges were established in most parts of Africa.

The curricula provided by all these institutions were determined by the colonial rulers and were closely modeled on, if not carbon copies of, those of the metropolitan countries and therefore irrelevant to the needs of the continent. They also struck at the very roots of African religious beliefs, sanctions and taboos and thereby shook the foundations of African societies, bringing in their trail a sense of uncertainty, frustration and insecurity.

The impact of this inadequate, lopsided and wrongly orientated education on African societies has been profound and almost permanent. First, it left Africa with a huge illiteracy problem, a problem whose solution will take a long time. Secondly, the educated elite that were produced were, by and large, and alienated elite that adored European culture and civilization and looked down on African culture. However, since the elite included the wealthiest people and since they occupied the highest posts available both during and after the colonial era, they came to wield power and influence out of all proportion to their numbers.

Beneficial as the linguae francae promoted through the educational systems were, they had the regrettable consequence of preventing the development of some of the indigenous languages into national languages. Twi, Hausa and Swahili could easily have been developed as the national languages of the Gold Coast, Nigeria and the three British East African colonies respectively. In fact, an attempt was made by the colonial administrators of British East Africa to develop Swahili as a lingua franca during the 1930s and 1940s, but this attempt was countermanded by the Colonial Office.

Another highly regrettable social impact of colonialism was the deterioration that it caused in the status of women in Africa. This is a new theme which needs further research, but there does not appear to be any doubt that women were inhibited from joining in most of the activities introduced or intensified by colonialism. The colonial world was indeed a man's world and women were not encouraged to play any meaningful role in it.

Moreover, under colonialism Africans in general were looked down upon, humiliated and discriminated against both overtly and covertly. In his recent Reith lectures, Ali Mazrui emphasized this legacy of humiliation imposed on the African by the triple sins of the slave trade, apartheid and colonialism when he declared:

"Africans are not necessarily the most brutalized peoples, but they are certainly the most humiliated in modern history."

Some historians have concluded that "colonialism produced its own gravediggers", while Maugham has maintained that "On the tombstone of the British Empire may be written 'Lost by snobbery".

Worse still was the impact of colonialism in the cultural field. Throughout the colonial period, African art, music, dancing and even history were all not only ignored but positively discouraged or denied. As one speaker declared at the Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, in Rome, in 1959: "Among the sins of colonialism, one of the most pernicious, because it was for a long time accepted by the West, was the concept of people without culture."

Nevertheless, in the cultural field, the impact of colonialism was relatively speaking neither profound nor permanent. Such changes as were introduced in the cultural field, such racial discrimination as was practiced, and such condemnation of African culture as was preached, even in the heyday of colonialism, were all confined to the coastal areas and the urban centers and never penetrated into the rural areas where life ran gaily on very much as before. African dance, art, music and traditional religious systems held their own and any borrowings and adaptations were additions rather than substitutions.

In the rural areas, and even to some extent in the urban centers, new beliefs, new gods, new utensils, new artifacts and new objects were added to the old ones. Certainly, in these areas many Christians did and still do retain their belief in their traditional gods. Indeed, in the field of religion, it was if anything the European religious that were Africanized, as is obvious from the rituals of some of the syncretic and millenarian churches, and not the other way round.

What is more important, the ground that was lost in the field of culture, even in the urban centers, has virtually been regained. Today, African art, music and dance are not only taught in educational institutions of all kinds but are now booming in Africa and gaining recognition in Europe. Thus, as far as the cultural field is concerned, colonialism was certainly only a brief episode and its impact skin-deep and ephemeral.

From all the above it should be clear that it is an over-reaction to write off colonialism as an unmitigated disaster for Africa that caused nothing but underdevelopment and backwardness. Equally guilty of over-statement are those colonial apologists who see colonialism as an unqualified blessing for Africa.

But whatever colonialism did for Africans in Africa, given its opportunities, its resources and the power and influence it wielded in Africa at the time, it could and should have done more. As P.C. Lloyd wrote:

"So much more might perhaps have been done had the development of backward territories been seen by the industrial nations as a first priority."

It is precisely because colonial rulers did not see the development of Africans as their first priority or even as a priority at all that they stand condemned. It is for these two reasons that the colonial era will go down in history as a period of growth without development, of the ruthless exploitation of the resources of Africa, and, on balance, of the pauperization and humiliation of the peoples of Africa.

In the long history of Africa, colonialism was merely an episode or interlude in the many-faceted and variegated experiences of its peoples. It was nonetheless an extremely important episode politically, economically and even socially. It marks a clear watershed in the history of Africa whose development has been and will continue to be very much influenced by the colonial impact.

The most expedient course of action for African leaders to embark upon today, then, is not to write off colonialism, but rather to be conversant with its impact and to try to redress its shortcomings and its failures.

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